

PAIN MYTH #2

"Pain is necessary for healing."

THE MYTH

Pain after injury or surgery is a natural and necessary part of recovery. Treating it interferes with healing and should be avoided or minimised.

✓ WHAT SCIENCE SHOWS

Severe unmanaged pain serves no protective benefit and can complicate recovery. Good pain management supports, rather than undermines, healing.

? WHY DOES THIS MATTER?



Acute pain has a role, but only up to a point

Pain after injury or surgery signals that something needs attention. **It does not need to be severe or left unmanaged to do its job.** Managing it well still allows rest, movement, sleep, and rehabilitation.



Severe unmanaged pain affects the whole body

Untreated pain triggers a stress response affecting breathing, circulation, sleep, and the immune system. **Poor pain control has been linked to slower recovery and more complications.**



Unmanaged pain can sensitise the nervous system

Severe, prolonged pain can amplify pain signals over time, a process called central sensitisation. **This is one of the mechanisms linking poor acute pain control to chronic pain.**



The goal is not zero pain

Effective management does not mean eliminating all discomfort. **The aim is a level that allows rest and rehabilitation,** and that reduces the risk of the nervous system becoming overly sensitised.



Asking for help with pain is not weakness

Cultural beliefs around stoicism can discourage people from seeking relief after surgery or injury. People who actively engage with pain management, whether through medication, physiotherapy, or psychological support, tend to recover more effectively than those who simply endure. **Seeking support is a sound clinical decision, not a sign of weakness.**

HOW WE CAME TO UNDERSTAND THIS

Our understanding of acute pain developed over decades through both laboratory and clinical research. Laboratory work showed that prolonged pain stimulation produces lasting changes in the spinal cord and brain, the basis of central sensitisation, helping to explain why pain can outlast the injury that caused it.

Clinical research in surgical and post-operative care documented the consequences of poorly controlled acute pain and tested whether managing it better could improve recovery, contributing to the modern approach in which pain management is an active part of recovery rather than an afterthought. Persistent pain after surgery or injury is now recognised as multifactorial: acute pain severity is one contributing factor among several, alongside the nature of the procedure, nerve injury, pre-existing pain, and individual differences.

Woolf (2011). Central sensitization: implications for the diagnosis and treatment of pain. *Pain*. doi: 10.1016/j.pain.2010.09.030 | Pogatzki-Zahn et al. (2017). Postoperative pain, from mechanisms to treatment. *Pain Rep*. doi: 10.1097/PR9.0000000000000588 | Glare et al. (2019). Transition from acute to chronic pain after surgery. *Lancet*. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30352-6

WHAT EXPERTS SAY



A well-balanced pain management strategy after surgery or injury that addresses the individual needs of a patient is the best option to improve recovery, engage in rehabilitation, and prevent long-term complications.



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We should not confuse enduring pain with strength. Pain is protective in the acute phase, but when prolonged, it can drive maladaptive changes in the nervous system. Appropriate pain management supports recovery while reducing the risk of pain becoming persistent.



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THE KEY TAKEAWAY

Pain after injury or surgery is not something you simply have to endure. Managing it well, at a level that allows you to rest, move, and recover, is an important part of the recovery process. If pain following an injury, procedure, or illness is severe or not improving, speak to a healthcare professional. Seeking help is the right thing to do.